Letter from the Chair, Brian K. Payne, PhD

I hope that your semester is going well. Much has been going on in the Department of Criminal Justice at Georgia State University over the past several months. For example, last semester, the Criminal Justice Student Association hosted a number of events that were designed to help students learn more about different criminal justice professions, and they are planning other activities this semester. Please support the Criminal Justice Student Association by either participating in those events or joining the organization. Other activities included a welcome back reception for new students and a reception for graduating students. Watch for similar events in the upcoming weeks.

The faculty have been engaging in a number of other exciting activities. Beyond the ongoing research that contributes to the discipline in important ways, our faculty have been assessing current courses with an aim towards developing the best curriculum possible. Part of our assessment included a survey of alumni as well as focus group interviews with graduating seniors. In doing this, the Department can ensure that students’ needs are being addressed in this dynamic and changing world. Based on this assessment, a series of recommendations have been made. Watch for upcoming changes in future newsletters or check out our website. In the meantime, feel free to send me an email or schedule an appointment if there is anything you would like to talk about. We are here for you. So please take advantage of all that is available to you.

What is particularly exciting is being a part of the transition that occurs between the time students come to us as new majors and the time they leave us as graduates. We are very proud of being a part of your lives during this important time!

Before They Were Professors

Not long ago, VH1 was home to a show called “Before They Were Rock Stars.” The premise of the show was simple—rock stars talked about their past jobs and lives. Along those same lines, many students might wonder what their professors did “Before they were professors.” Below is a list of different jobs. See if you can guess which professor held each job. Answers are below.

1. Traffic counter
2. Cab driver
3. Police officer
4. Tourist Guide
5. House painter and bartender
6. Retail management
7. Carnival worker
8. Paper boy
9. Probation officer
10. Pizza Hut employee
11. Crisis counselor for a hotline
12. Bouncer on Bourbon Street
13. Clinical psychologist
14. Secret Service
15. Retail security
16. Lawn mower salesperson
17. Hardware salesperson
18. Bank teller
19. Guitarist in a band
20. Jailer
21. Dancer


Recent Student/Alumni Accomplishments

Cynthia Padilla received the Georgia State University 2008 Torch of Peace Award for Undergraduate Students.

Jessica Ekhomu was selected for a Georgia Board of Regents academic award.

Vita Smith was the only senior on the GSU women’s basketball team this past season. Check out the great photo of her in the February 26 issue of The Signal.

Charley English (B.S. 1986) was appointed director of Homeland Security for the state of Georgia.

Todd Ashley (B.S. 1993) was appointed to the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council.

Weldon Kennedy (M.S. 1989) recently published On Scene Commander, a book describing his four decades in law enforcement which included several years as the Deputy Director of the FBI.

We Need Your Help…

In the most recent newsletter, we solicited your input for naming the newsletter. Below is a list of names you recommended. Send an email to Jessica Ekhomu (jekhomu@gsu.edu) to vote for the name you think is best. The student who recommended the newsletter name with the most votes by April 20 will win.

1. The Criminal Justice News
2. The System
3. CJ Tells Us
4. CJ System of GSU
5. The Balance of Justice: Dept. of CJ Newsletter
6. The Justice Times
7. The Grid
8. CJ Daily
9. Arrested Developments
10. Criminal Just Us News
From CJSA President, Ryan Faucett...

As we enter the last stages of this semester, many of us will soon be graduating, bringing a rigorous and memorable four year event to close. However, I'm certain there are those of you who are approaching graduation with no solid career plans (yet). Fear not, this is where the CJSA comes in to assist you.

The first and most important event we host will be the spring career fair on April 24 in the ballroom. Representatives from all three branches of the criminal justice system will be present. These agencies will also be from all levels of government (local, state, and federal). While I am unable to provide a complete list of attendees at this moment (we are still working to secure some agencies), I can tell you to expect approximately 30 different entities including the Atlanta Police Department, Secret Service, the Georgia Department of Corrections, and several others. I strongly encourage you to mark your calendars for the career fair, as agencies have recruited students after meeting them at this event. Remember, the agencies representatives are not attending because they need to kill a few hours. They are there strictly for the purpose of seeking out and recruiting YOU.

We will also be hosting a few smaller scale events during the semester with various professionals from the field (primarily law enforcement). The CJSA is also planning a lecture series in conjunction with the Department of Criminal Justice. These events will help to broaden our “criminal justice horizons.”

Many of you have inquired as to how to attain information/dates on the CJSA’s activities. Since keeping all 450 of you apprised of our activities has been a very challenging task, I have devised two methods that you can use to stay informed. First, check the Department of Criminal Justice website. We will be posting most, if not all of our events as announcements that you will be able to view at your leisure. Also, I have an email list that you can join. Simply send an email with the subject "email list" to cjsa@gsu.edu and you will be added immediately.

I hope you will join us for our career fair in April (and hopefully find yourself a job), and the numerous other events during the spring. I wish you all well in your studies this semester, and it has been a pleasure to serve as your President!

Want a Reference?— Some Tips
by Brian K. Payne, Ph.D.

When I was a senior, I asked one of my favorite professors if she would write me a reference letter. She said she would, but that she wanted me to write the letter and she would sign it.

I didn’t know what to write, so I just went and asked other professors for letters. If I would have known then what I know now, I would have gone about it entirely differently. In my view, if you want a good reference letter, you should do certain things. I have developed some guidelines for students who ask me for a reference letter. Here they are:

- I need a resume from you. If I know what you have done and what you plan to do, I can speak about those activities with confidence.
- I need a pre-addressed postage-paid envelope from you. This is not about a state budget crisis; it’s about making it easier to get the letter in the mail, especially if I am working from home. Also, you can make sure it is being sent to the right place.
- I need your unofficial transcript from GOSOLAR. I want to know what courses you have had.
- I want a list of classes you have had with me. While I like to try to get to know each of you, it is difficult to remember what class we had together. I need to be reminded.
- Tell me about the papers you wrote in my class. If I can say something about your writing ability, it will certainly help.
- Give me a copy of major papers you wrote if they are available. I’m not going to make up stuff about your writing ability. I want to be able to refer to specific examples.
- Provide a list of accomplishments you are most proud of. I need to know what you are all about. While I was too shy to write my own reference letter, it really is not a bad idea.
- Tell me in writing that you allow me to make statements about your grades and class performance in my efforts to write your reference letter (this is a legal requirement).

Be sure to only ask faculty members who you know will give you a decent reference. There is nothing worse than getting a lukewarm reference. You are probably better off with no reference than you are with a generic one. If we say we are too busy, we are doing you a favor.

Also, you should ask your references what they want from you in order to do the reference. In effect, the way you ask for a reference may influence the kind of reference you get. So, don’t be shy. Be confident, respectful, and helpful.

ABCs of Acing Your Finals
Ask questions when you have them.
Begin studying early.
Cramming must be avoided.
Students Speak Out, Jessica L. Ekhomu, Senior
(editor’s note—Jessica is a student employee in the department)

For centuries, scholars have been searching for a solution to the crime problem. Yet, in a survey, I gave criminal justice students 5 whole minutes to provide their solutions to the American crime problem. The caveat, however, was that this critical thinking exercise gave the students unlimited resources and unlimited authority to propose the best efforts to combat crime.

Drawing on their knowledge of criminological theory of crime and prevention, about 20 students offered their suggestions on how various efforts can be made to decrease the prevalence of crime throughout the country. Many suggestions relied heavily upon anomic/strain, youth-oriented social bonding, and deterrence perspectives. Some of these suggestions will be discussed further.

Anomie and Strain: In short, Merton’s (1938) anomic theory suggests that there is an imbalance between the value society places on goals, and the value society places on the means to achieve those goals. And furthermore, strain theory suggests that while such value is placed on certain goals, legitimate means to achieving those goals are not accessible to certain populations, creating a “strain” to achieve the goals. Using this foundation, several students proposed better educational opportunities, where they would “give all children free education so that every child has the same opportunities to succeed so they will not grow up and turn to crime to survive” (anonymous), and make higher education available to more people at no cost so that fewer people would resort to crime as a means to an end (Julie Ivey). Others opted to simply “give people enough money to meet their needs” (anonymous); “solve poverty” (Kareem) because “all Americans are aiming for economic success and if everyone had equal financial assets it would help end crime” (anonymous); and, give “more monetary and supervisory resources to protect and prevent opportunities for deviant behavior” (anonymous).

Social Bonding: In short, Hirschi’s (1969) social bonding theory suggests that strong bonds to society cause people to conform to societal norms of acceptable behavior. Many students applied this theory to youth by proposing programs that “catch them young and establish anti-crime behaviors in them to promote changes for the future” (anonymous), and efforts that “get them from under the spell of guns, money, and drugs so we can direct them to be successful individuals who will not perform criminal activity” (anonymous). Some proposals suggested that we “try to bring in more youth groups to inner-city, impoverished, high crime areas [to help them] form positive social bonds early in life” (anonymous). In sum, the students seemed to believe that “if we as a nation began to focus on our family unit and the moral fiber of our youth…it would have some impact on behavior” (Kaleb McElroy).

Deterrence: In short, deterrence theory suggests that a potential offender will consider the certainty, harshness, and celerity of punishment in making a rational choice to commit a crime. Thus, if there is a likely punishment, the individual may refrain from committing a crime. Using this perspective, one student suggested that we implement “more severe punishment for smaller crimes [because] this may deter criminals from committing larger ones” (anonymous).

My Proposition: Using Consensus Theory: A few students offered suggestions in sync with my own view that uses Sumner’s (1906) version of consensus theory, which suggests that crimes are what society wants them to be, as defined through formal law, court rulings, folkways, and mores. Law is shaped by society, so what society deems to be criminal will be considered as such. For this reason, I suggest an overhaul on criminal codes, where a legal body (perhaps the MPCC) would revise criminal codes to exclude victimless crimes, like drug crimes and prostitution (as also suggested by Ryan Fausett) to enable more emphasis and funding to be placed with more serious offenses. Drug offenses are not inherently criminal, but we’ve found a way to spend large budgets on fighting the drug war, and locking up drug offenders.

Conclusion: These views that have been expressed serve two important functions. First, the students’ ideas are indicative of the theories they have subscribed to as criminal justice majors, which helps when assessing their understanding and affinity towards certain theories. Second, the students who participated in the activity represent the next generation of policy makers, theorists, and practitioners in criminology and criminal justice; therefore, their current views of crime prevention may heavily impact future decision-making as professionals.

Distinguished Chair of Public Safety Partnerships News

Dr. Robbie Friedmann has been working on several initiatives including the Improving Crime Data Project and serving as the director of the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE). The Improving Crime Data project, funded by the National Institute of Justice, has been instrumental in developing a new, and more accurate, way to organize and interpret crime data that resulted, among other outcomes, in a different way of ranking crime in large cities. This new technique takes into account various societal factors in using crime data to rank cities across the United States. Using this approach provides a more accurate and realistic portrayal of crime rankings across cities. As part of this initiative, Dr. Friedmann convened the national Improving Crime Data Advisory Board meeting this past semester.

Dr. Friedmann has also led different activities for GILEE. This past fall, eight law enforcement executives from Israel participated in the exchange and spent two weeks in Georgia learning about law enforcement practices in our state. During their visit, the mayor of Columbus, Georgia, proclaimed October 25th as GILEE Day. More recently, the Georgia House of Representatives adopted resolutions recognizing the corporate board of GILEE as part of the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police (GACP) recognition of “Chiefs Day at the State Capitol.”
The experiences that ultimately led me to an academic career in criminology and criminal justice—and to my new position at GSU—were the product of several significant “turning points” in my life. Life course criminologists define turning points as events or experiences that alter the trajectory of one’s life in ways that are significant or meaningful to the individual. The interesting thing about such turning points is that they often involve random or chance encounters—planning or calculation may play little role.

Nevertheless, when I look back on the unforeseen fortuitous events and surprises that shaped my career, it is interesting to see how each turning point set the perfect stage for the next. As Schopenhauer observed, when you’re in the thick of things, life often appears to be a mess. But when you have a chance to look back on it all, your life may have the appearance of a carefully constructed plot.

A significant turning point involved my decision, at age 18, to become a reserve police officer. My delinquent associates were quick to question my sanity. Hence my alienation from ordinary citizens and my introduction to the police subculture was virtually immediate. I could not know it at the time, but the observations I made of my delinquent peers—their attitudes toward law enforcement, work, and life itself—would provide a wealth of insight for my later criminological research (the time has come to acknowledge their influence!). Although I eventually decided to leave law enforcement, I learned much about human nature during my time as a reserve officer. I observed people at their best and worst—both citizens and, at times, individuals in uniform. As a result of these experiences, I wanted to learn more about the etiology of problem behavior.

Graduate school was a logical next step, but I could not anticipate how fitting this step would be. Shortly after I enrolled in the graduate program at Emory University (a program I had selected rather haphazardly), Robert Agnew published his “general strain theory” of crime and delinquency. Given my previous experiences dealing with angry and frustrated people (as a paper boy, a convenience store clerk, a counselor at a treatment center, and a reserve officer), general strain theory had immediate intuitive appeal and I was hooked. With Agnew’s support, I embarked on an academic career that led me to Tulane University in New Orleans. The greatest single “turning point” during this period was Hurricane Katrina. Despite the tremendous amount of human suffering associated with the storm, I could not divorce myself from my role as a social scientist. Natural disasters have long been regarded as “ethically acceptable natural experiments for sociological [and might I add criminological] research.” I also developed a new appreciation for the important role of social science research in disaster management and planning.

My new position at GSU has already provided opportunities to pursue and—better yet—expand my research and teaching interests in criminological theory, youth violence, and disaster. It is particularly rewarding to work with colleagues who are passionate about their teaching and research and to work within a college whose stated mission is to support activities “that improve health and well-being and address social justice issues within a multi-cultural society.” It is easy to view my current position as another fortuitous outcome.

In addition to teaching and conducting important research projects, faculty in the Department of Criminal Justice engage in a number of different projects that ultimately serve the interests of the community or discipline. Below is a partial list of some of these activities.

**Dr. Brenda Blackwell** is serving as the chair of the Internal Awards Committee for the American Society of Criminology’s Division on Women and Crime. In this capacity, she leads efforts to recognize the accomplishments of members of the division.

**Dr. Timothy Brezina** is continuing his research on the portrayal of crime and violence in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina.

**Dr. Sue Collins** delivered several presentations on investigating sexual harassment complaints to different professional groups including the Florida Association of Internal Affairs Investigators, the Public Agency Training Council, and the National Association of Internal Affairs Investigators.

**Dr. Dean Dabney** continues to serve on the Atlanta Police Department’s Citizen’s Advisory Council for Zone 2. As a member of the council, he is able to use his academic background to offer advice and guidance on various matters.

**Dr. Mary Finn**, as associate provost for institutional effectiveness, is leading the university-wide effort to incorporate critical thinking through writing initiatives in every department at Georgia State University.

**Dr. Robbie Friedmann** convened the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Community Policing Committee in Atlanta for its mid-year meeting with 25 chiefs attending from the US and other countries.

**Dr. Wendy Pogorzelski** gave a presentation to the Georgia Drug Court Administrators about implementing evidence-based practices into drug court programs and strategies to maximize working with a researcher/program evaluator.

**Dr. Mark Reed** serves as the treasurer and board member for the Crime Victim Advocacy Council, Inc. In this role, he participated in different efforts including helping to design a survey for a homicide support group, collecting funds for the group’s annual memorial service, and preparing and presenting financial statements.

**Dr. Volkan Topalli** is serving on the English Avenue Community Public Safety Committee. Using his research on street violence, he is able to offer advice to community members about ways to prevent violence.

**Dr. Barbara Warner** is serving as the associate editor for the *Journal of Crime and Justice*. In the past year alone, for this journal and for others, she reviewed sixteen different submissions.

**Dr. Sue-Ming Yang** is conducting research on terrorism, with a particular focus on identifying why terrorists attack the United States.